

THE PRIORITY OF PRAYING TOGETHER

~Other Speakers A-F: John Franklin:

In June of 1990 I found myself unexpectedly in awe. I had joined a team of about 250 people to participate in a two week evangelistic crusade in Mombasa, Kenya, a seaside city of roughly a million people. The organizers divided most of us into teams of three and we went hut to hut, house to house presenting the gospel. There is no other way to describe those fourteen days except that the glory of God simply descended - nearly 30,000 people responded to the gospel. A few times in my life I have been in a service or prayer meeting where the manifest presence of God could be felt, but never before in a whole city. Wherever we walked, the presence of the Lord tangibly permeated the land, so much so that often people were being saved by the dozens. If emotions could be converted to food, incredulity found its way on my plate at every meal. I could tell many stories to illustrate just how amazing the experience was, but one in particular captures it.

Our little team of three had just finished witnessing in one of the villages and we were walking down a dirt road that led to the next. Up ahead were several Kenyan men seated on stools by the roadside. As we approached one of them arose, walked briskly toward us, and greeted us in English (not totally unusual because Kenya had been a British colony). "Excuse me, are you from America?" he inquired with an obvious agenda. I responded, "Yes." He continued, "Are you one of the ones who has come here to tell us the word of God?" Again I answered, "Yes." His voice intensified solemnly, "We've heard that you've come, and we've heard of Jesus and His great power. Tell me, how does one become His follower? My friends and I want to know." I explained the plan of salvation to which without the least trace of hesitation he immediately replied, "Let's pray." I thought to myself, "that was too easy. He must not have understood." So I explained it again. "I understood the first time" he said with impatience, "Let's pray!" Do you see why this story sums it up? The glory of God fell so powerfully that they came to us to be saved.

You've picked up this book on how to lead prayer meetings, and that's a nice little story I just told. What have they got to do with each other? Actually, everything.

The revival in Mombasa had begun months earlier through prayer meetings, and prayer meetings had continued steadily until our arrival. In fact, during our two week stay there was never a time that some church failed to pray all night. I had been learning God required prayer as a prerequisite to His working powerfully, so I prayed I could attend one of these meetings. God in His graciousness promptly answered, and a few days later I found myself in an all night prayer meeting. Four congregations had come together to pray in one of the sister churches. That church, one of the nicest I saw, was by our standards a crude structure with sparse accommodations. Rough, unfinished concrete constituted the floor. Homemade benches of plank lumber served as the pews. Two or three low watt bulbs provided all the lighting. The air conditioning system consisted of open windows. By American standards most of our garages were nicer than this building. However, in stark contrast to this humble edifice stood the rich hearts of the people. Faces etched in joy fervently worshiped the Lord. They sang, they testified, they listened to preaching, they prayed. We disbanded and I went to bed at 7:00am. Four hours later I awoke completely, totally refreshed, without the least trace of fatigue. So great was the presence of God in my hotel room that I didn't even rise from my bed. I merely slid out from under the sheets to my knees. Through Bible reading, I sensed that our day would be particularly blessed, and indeed that's exactly what happened. That afternoon in our witnessing, not a single adult rejected the gospel, the only day that happened.

Do you see the connection? The whole revival had come through prayer meetings, and the greatest day I experienced followed an all night prayer meeting.

This chapter has one purpose; however, it's not to convince you that we must pray if we would see the power of God. You might assume that based on what I've just written, but I have something much more specific in mind. Before I tell you what it is, I wish there were a way to communicate the significance of what you're about to read. Perhaps if you could imagine us at a coffee shop sipping drinks having a chat about spiritual things. When the topic turned to prayer, you would see me preface this truth by putting down the cup and pushing it aside, lean forward with eyes narrowed and speak in a lowered voice. "What I'm about to tell you is one of the reasons why most of our churches don't have very much spiritual power. In times past this was practiced, but we've abandoned it by and large in our day." You would catch the intensity and conviction in my tone, "The greatest workings of God come by corporate prayer; and will we not see the power of God in sufficient measure to transform the world around us until we pray together. As a leader you must make praying together on the same priority level as preaching/teaching"

If I sound a little melodramatic, good, then I'm communicating! It really is that important. I so desire to sow

this seed of conviction in your heart's soil of resoluteness that when you put down this chapter, you will conclude that your spiritual fate depends not just on prayer, but praying with other Christians. Personal prayer lives alone will not result in the working of God to the degree needed to spiritually transform our lives, our churches, our cities or our nation. God in His sovereignty has determined that something happens when we pray together that transcends us praying separately. His working increases exponentially, not additionally. When we pray individually, one plus one equals two; but when we pray together, one plus one equals three. Since these statements are somewhat radical, I would like to submit five reasons to justify this premise. Later I will also make some clarifications about the role of our personal prayer life, which I am not trying to minimize. In fact, I believe that they are like two wings of an airplane. Which one would you rather do without? The absence of either would be fatal. But that's just the point, if we don't pray together we will go down a spiritually slippery slope. If we do pray together God's way, we can expect a revolution of our society.

THE PROOFS OF WHY THIS IS TRUE

So why the swashbuckling style of swinging a brash pen with such bold assertions? What's the hard core evidence to support these statements? Many exist, but for space sake, we'll limit it to five proofs. I'm listing them according to the process and in order that I learned them.

One: What The Apostles Believed And Practiced

Have you ever been reading the Bible when it "happened" to you? You're reading along minding your own business, when all of a sudden you realize a passage does not mean what you always thought it meant. Let me tell you how it happened to me early one morning several years ago. I opened my Bible to Acts 6, my quiet time passage for the day. To be candid I approached it lazily and disinterestedly. I knew that chapter recorded what many call the choosing of the first deacons. So, to give it a little spice, I flipped up the Greek on my Bible software. I began reading nonchalantly in verse 1:

Now in those days, when the number of the disciples was multiplying, there arose a complaint against the Hebrews by the Hellenists, because their widows were neglected in the daily distribution.

The word distribution was actually diakonia in Greek. It's from the same basic root family as the word deacon and ministry. It wasn't just a functional duty, but you could see the ministry aspect of serving people. "How interesting," I thought, "but no big deal." I continued reading verse 2:

Then the twelve summoned the multitude of the disciples and said, "It is not desirable that we should leave the word of God and serve tables.

The word serve was diakonein in Greek – again, the same root family – again interesting, but no big deal. I read verse 3 without incident:

Therefore, brethren, seek out from among you seven men of good reputation, full of the Holy Spirit and wisdom, whom we may appoint over this business;

Then I came to verse 4, when all of the sudden it happened to me. In English it reads:

but we will give ourselves continually to prayer and to the ministry of the word.

That's not what it says in Greek. It literally reads but we to THE prayer and the DIAKONIA of the word will steadfastly continue. When I read that I had to push away from the computer screen in disbelief.

You see all my life I had interpreted that passage to mean the Apostles recognized the need to delegate ministries responsibilities to others so that they would be freed up to spend time in prayer and receive a fresh word from the Lord to preach to the people. They realized they couldn't become so enmeshed in the work of

the Lord that their personal relationship with Him suffered and therefore become ineffectual from the pulpit (or wherever it was they preached/taught in the 1st century). I always assumed they were referring to their personal prayer life.

Perhaps I concluded that from experience. Right out of seminary I was privileged to pastor a megachurch – of three people. Only one faithful family remained, and as a young 25 year old I went there to rebuild the broken foundations with them. Early on I discovered an interesting dynamic. I quickly realized I not only had the honor of preaching the sermon on Sunday; but also of scrubbing the toilet on Monday. Any work to be done fell to one of us four. Soon in the bustle of activity my own personal prayer time suffered and I found a negative effect on my preaching. Not having as much time in prayer hurt my sensitivity to God’s voice, so I struggled more in sermons. This experience colored my belief that the Apostles modeled the necessity of delegating responsibilities in order to guard time for prayer so as to preach powerfully. That morning I realized that was not the point of this passage. Mouth agape, it dawned on me they were not referring to their personal prayer life, but to the ministry of mobilizing the people of God to pray together. They were declaring that the two ministries they especially must do as church leaders were mobilizing the church to pray and to preach/teach the word of God. Do you see why I was so shocked? What tremendous implications!

Here’s what clued me in that the passage speaks of the ministry of prayer instead of their personal prayer lives. First, the context of the passage revolves around ministries. In verse one there is a problem with a ministry. In verse two the Apostles discuss what ministry they will and won’t do. In verse three and four they choose seven to put them in charge of the ministry to widows, while they go to the prayer and the ministry of the word. You can almost see them drawing this up on the chalkboard like a football coach. “OK team, the O’s will take the widows; the X’s will take prayer and the Word. Any questions? OK, on three.” Nothing in this passage refers to anything personal, only ministries. Second, although the word ministry does not specifically occur before the word prayer, the definite article the does. The verse reads but we to THE prayer and the diakonia of the word will steadfastly continue. They do not mean prayer in general, but have something specific in mind. The syntax creates the possibility that prayer and the word are twin ideas. Later I would read 13 commentaries to double check. Eleven of them didn’t comment either way, but the two that did confirmed they spoke of corporate prayer.

My surprise soon turned into a squirming discomfort because of the implications. I mused, “Are the Apostles actually saying that out of all the ministries they could do, what they cannot let go of is preaching/teaching the word of God and leading the prayer life of the church? Is this really what the Bible pictures here – that leaders ought to consider guiding the corporate prayer life of the church just as critical a priority as preaching/teaching the Word of God?” I thought, “I’d better be right on this one. I’d better not draw such a weighty conclusion from one passage alone.” Then an idea popped in my mind. “Well, if this is indeed the case, then it should be reflected in the book of Acts. They should live their lives that way.”

So I went and looked up every occurrence of prayer in Acts preceding chapter 6 and discovered prayer mentioned five times – Acts 1:14, 1:24, 2:42, 3:1, 4:23-31. Amazingly, every single verse pictured the Apostles leading others in prayer, not once is their personal prayer life recorded. In every instance we see the Apostles involved in leading the people of God to pray together; therefore, these stories confirm that Acts 6:4 speaks of a corporate ministry of prayer.

This pattern certainly strengthened the case, but I really wanted to be sure. Then I thought, “If they apostles really believed this way, where would they have gotten that idea?” Well, Jesus obviously. So I decided to study Jesus on prayer.

Two: What Jesus Modeled and Taught On Prayer

I searched the words pray, prays, prayed, praying, prayer, prayers, ask, asks, asked, asking, watch, watches, watched, and watching in my concordance. I used seven criteria for selecting verses (see Appendix A), but basically I was after the core teaching of Jesus on prayer. I wanted to know what He commanded, or gave as a condition for God to answer favorably. I searched and identified 37 verses in the gospels that fit these criteria and discovered an amazing reality. Out of those 37 verses, guess how many times the word you was plural? Amazingly 33 out of 37 verses are in the corporate. Unfortunately, you can be either in the singular or plural in English. Given the individualistic nature of American society, most people tend to read it as singular when in reality the opposite usually holds true. For example, Matthew 7:7 and Mark 11:25 actually say:

You all ask, and it will be given to you all; you all seek and you all will find; you all knock, and it will be opened to you all.

And whenever you all stand praying, if you all have anything against anyone, you all forgive him, that you all's Father in Heaven may forgive you all of you all's trespasses.

The fact that Jesus taught in the corporate made a compelling case by itself, but Jesus also framed the condition for answered prayer in such a way that heightened the stipulation of praying together. He told His disciples in Matthew 18:19, "Again I say to you that if two of you agree on earth concerning anything that they ask, it will be done for them by My Father in heaven." He could have said "if anyone asks..." Instead He deliberately crafted His words in the plural. Evidently God has designed prayer to especially require we pray together.

Finally most of Jesus' recorded times of private prayer occur prior to choosing the disciples (Mark 1:37, Luke 3:21, 6:12) whereas after choosing them most of His recorded prayer times involved the disciples (Luke 9:28, 11:1, Mat 26:40). Even in the Garden of Gethsemane when facing the greatest crisis of His life, the looming shadow of a cross, even then He asked the disciples to watch with Him. In every way, He modeled and commanded the necessity of praying together.

The case was growing, and I began to understand why, which I'll mention at the end of this chapter. However, I wanted to test this truth in other ways. Knowing that God is the same yesterday, today, and forever, I decided to look at the pattern of the Bible as a whole. Another very surprising dynamic emerged.

Three: The Pattern of Scripture before and after the resurrection

I sought to answer this question Did the mighty moves of God come primarily through the prayer life of an individual or two or more believers? To find the answer, I read Genesis through Esther, then Acts through Revelation. Both the Old and the New Testament record examples of private and corporate prayer, and God exercised His power through both examples. However, it quickly became apparent that a defining moment, a spiritual watershed divided the way God worked. In the Old Testament, God usually chose an individual through which He communicated or exercised His power in response to prayer. For example, God only spoke with Abraham about the promised son (Gen 15:4). Moses was by himself on Mount Sinai interceding for the people when God decided that He would forgive them (Ex 32:14). Joshua by himself apparently cries out for the sun to stand still (Josh 10:12). No one other than Samson pleaded with God and the temple came tumbling down (Jud 16:28). Of course, corporate prayer does exist in the Old Testament such as the case of the temple dedication and revivals; but even then it is exercised in a markedly different manner from the New Testament. For example, typically the pattern for the Old is that the people cry out to God, but the answer does not come to anyone but the judge or the prophet (twice the prophetess, perhaps directly to the king on occasion). Most often kings seem dependent on hearing from the prophet (1 Kings 22:8, 2 Sam 24:7, 1Chr 12:5, 2 Chr 11:2, 12:7, Is 38:2-5, etc). Likewise, the people of God consulted the man of God (1 Sam 9:9) because they do not hear for themselves. God usually did not answer them directly, but primarily communicated with them through the prophet, an intermediary.

In the New Testament this radically changes. In the Book of Acts the 120 are gathered in an upper room praying in one accord when Pentecost comes (Acts 1:13, 2:1). The group prayed for wisdom in knowing who Judas' replacement should be (Acts 1:24). When Peter and John reported the Sanhedrin's threats, the church cried out to God in one accord for boldness and the place was shaken (Acts 4:24, 31). They prayed over the seven chosen to serve the widows (Acts 6:6). Peter and John interceded for those who had not received the Holy Spirit yet and He came (Acts 8:15-17). Peter was in prison but the church was fervently pleading with God for him (Acts 12:5). While the prophets and teachers were praying and fasting, the Holy Spirit called Paul and Barnabas on their first missionary journey (Acts 13:1-2). Then the church prayed before sending them out (Acts 13:3). Paul and Barnabas commended the new churches to God by prayer (Acts 14:23). Paul and his companions were going to prayer when Paul cast the demon out of the slave girl (Acts 16:16). Paul and Silas were praying when the earthquake happened that resulted in the jailer's conversion and their release (Acts 16:25). Paul prayed with all the Ephesians in his farewell address (Acts 20:36). Finally, they prayed with the disciples from Tyre (Acts 21:5).

Again the goal is not to deny the role of individual prayer. Ananias was praying alone when he was told to go to Saul (Acts 9:10). Peter was on the rooftop by himself when he had his famous vision leading him to Cornelius (Acts 10:9). However, in Acts and the rest of the New Testament the majority of God's recorded workings come when His people pray together.

This transition naturally raised the question, "Why the difference from the Old to the New Testament?" No verse expressly spells it out, but I believe it's safe to make logical conclusions based on the covenant change. Under the Old Covenant the people of God conducted their relationship with Him through the law. Because the veil was not rent, they did not have access to the Holy Spirit in the same way we do today. As I mentioned earlier, when God wanted to speak to His people, no one except the prophets or a few leaders could directly interact with God. This is why God's response to individual prayer dominates in the Old Testament. That radically changed under the New Covenant. Hebrews 8:11 states, "None of them shall teach his neighbor, and none his brother, saying, 'Know the LORD,' for all shall know Me, from the least of them to the greatest of them." Now His Holy Spirit has been poured out on all flesh, sons and daughters (Acts 2:17). Every child of God has equal access to the throne of God, not just a few select individuals.

The fact that every Christian can know God experientially creates the possibility of experiencing God together; however, by itself it doesn't mean anything. We could all be like millions of radios— all receiving transmissions from a tower, but individual, separate, stand alone units. But Scripture teaches that the moment God saves us, we are baptized by the Holy Spirit into one body (1 Cor 12:13). The foundation of our new spiritual life requires interdependence— of course, interdependence does exist in the Old Testament, but not in the same sense. Never is the analogy of a body used for the people of God until the birth of the church. The baptism into the Holy Spirit so intricately joined us together that we are no longer independent units fitted together, rather we are most like flesh and sinew. God so raised the level of connectivity that just as a body part can't accomplish its function except by depending on other body parts, neither can we do much of spiritual significance except connected and interdependent with one another. Although our roles and functions vary, God does not allow us to conduct our personal relationship with Him in isolation. He has ordained that our service in Christ requires teamwork with others. This does not mean a believer's personal prayer life is now obsolete or has become of lesser importance, but it does imply that being a body mandates we regularly encounter Him together. Focusing on the personal prayer life only would be equivalent to trying to play Mozart with one hand. All ten fingers prove absolutely necessary to create the music. Likewise, the new covenant with its body-life spills over into every aspect of our relationship with God and others, demanding that we practice both personal and corporate prayer.

The Scriptural evidence proved convincing, but I also decided to test history. If that's the way God worked in the Bible, then He also should be consistent through the ages. I applied the same basic question Since the resurrection, when have the greatest moves of God primarily occurred?

Four: Historically God's Greatest Works Have Come When

Christians Were Fervent in United Prayer.

A study of church history and asking experts confirmed my expectations. In fact, I did not discover a single example in which the church transformed the culture when Christians did not spend significant time praying together.

Here are a few examples. In 1857 America was in the middle of a strong economy. As is so often the case in prosperity, morals began slipping and a decreased interest in the things of God prevailed. Alarmed by the spiritual state of affairs, a Dutch Reformed layman named Jeremiah Lamphier tacked up notices in New York City calling for a weekly prayer meeting on Wednesdays from noon till one. The first week, only six showed up and none of them before 12:30. The next week, though, the attendance jumped to twenty. Then the numbers nearly doubled again, and on the fifteenth day they began meeting every weekday to pray. About that time Wall Street crashed. The ensuing financial panic arrested the country's attention and turned hearts toward heavenly matters. So great and so immediate were the changes that in less than six months time more than 10,000— 50,000 businessmen were meeting daily in New York to pray during the noon hour. Inexplicably, that little, inauspicious prayer meeting Lamphier started became the pattern God used. The movement leapt to every single major city in America by early 1858. The response of God to His people was that 1,000,000 Americans out of a population of 30,000,000 were converted in less than two years. At the height of revival, perhaps 50,000 a week were being saved. These examples indicate that the working of God in history is

consistent with the biblical pattern.

Fervent prayer meetings precipitated the Shantung Revival in northern China, 1927-37. God's Spirit suddenly descended, and the once anemic church ensconced in a spiritually dead culture began witnessing with dramatic results. One Chinese pastor commented, "When this revival began, we had about 50 members in our little church. Now we have at least one Christian in each of the 1,000 homes in this town." Another pastor repeated a similar experience. His little church had only 30 members, but when the revival came he baptized 89 on one occasion, 203 on another occasion and 20-30 every month after that. No one knows with certainty the number of conversions, but given the testimony of Dr. C. L. Culpepper, one may logically deduce that hundreds of thousands were swept into the kingdom, perhaps one million.

The activity of God in answer to corporate prayer may also be seen on smaller scales. Rees Howells journeyed to South Africa as a missionary. Six weeks after arriving he joined in a prayer meeting. Out of that came an outpouring of the Holy Spirit in which they had two revival meetings a day for 15 months, and all day on Friday. Thousands were converted as a result. J. O. Fraser, a missionary to the Lisu people in Southwest China, saw tens of thousands of conversions during his ministry. He encouraged small-group prayer in England for his ministry. Hudson Taylor, the great missionary to China, called a prayer meeting to ask for 100 new missionaries. He then returned to England and spoke to a large group. One hundred men and women volunteered to return with him and \$55,000 in cash was donated, even though he had not asked for a single offering.

History had verified the same pattern. I then applied this test to God's current activity today.

Five: The Mighty Moves of God Today Occur Where

Believers Practice Corporate Prayer

Let me ask you a question, "How's Christianity doing on a worldwide scale? Are we winning or losing?" If the Lord tarries, future generations will probably look back on ours with envy. Christianity is dramatically advancing across the world.

The most optimistic scenario I've heard came from Avery Willis, Vice-President of the International Mission Board. He reported in the fall of 1999 that it is possible that 70 percent of all people who have ever been saved have come to Christ in the 20th century; 70 percent of them since 1945; 70 percent of them since 1990. That means as of the turn of the century, possibly one third of all Christians who have ever lived have been converted since 1990! In Nepal just 2,000 Christians were known in 1990; but there were 500,000 by the end of the year 2,000. Cambodia claimed a scarce 600 Christians in 1990, but boasted 60,000 by the 21st century. No known Christians occupied Mozambique in 1988, now 300 churches exist in just one area. Just a few years ago in Asia, there were about 15 million Christians; today there are more than 100 million. In Korea during the 20th century the country advanced from being 1-3% Christians to perhaps 40% Christian today. The African continent has about the same percentages, with East Africa especially ranking as one of the greatest movements of God in history. I've already mentioned my story out of Kenya, but other countries are also experiencing the hand of God as well. Uganda, for example, once suffered terrible atrocities under the Islamic dictator, Idi Amin, who ravaged the country. Later the AIDS rate skyrocketed to claim approximately one third of the population. So devastating was the crisis that the World Health Organization predicted the collapse of the Ugandan economy by the year 2000. Today revival has come to that country and the AIDS rate is only 5%. So great is God's working that one church alone went from 7 to 2,000 in attendance in two weeks; currently they boast 22,000 members, and have planted 150 other churches. In our hemisphere about 40,000 evangelicals lived in South America, today about 40,000,000. Central America likewise is experiencing a tremendous movement of God. In India one denomination tracked about 3,000,000 conversions in eight years. Even the Muslim world, although not experiencing the same kind of large numbers, has proportionally speaking seen an astronomical increase in converts.

Christianity is advancing in most quarters except four primary areas. If you live in North America you know one of them. The other three are Japan, Australia, and Western Europe. Guess what one of the common denominators is everywhere Christianity marches forward? The Christians spend significant time praying together. In Korea and China many churches meet every morning to pray at least an hour before going to work and then they have all night prayer meetings on Friday. In India where one denomination tracked 3,000,000 conversions in 8 years, the believers began prayer meetings 1 to 2 times a week for their lost neighbors. In all

the areas where the gospel is gaining ascendancy, Christians spend time praying together.

In America we still practice the ministry of the Word. It's a centerpiece in most Protestant worship services. Outstanding radio teachers can be heard anywhere in the country. Books, videos, CDs, and tapes proliferate like no other time in history. Many churches have Bible study groups and Sunday Schools. However, by and large we have abandoned meaningful prayer meetings. Most that remain are anemic and weak. That begs the question: might there be a connection, especially in light of God's activity worldwide? Could we be spiritually imploding because we've forsaken what the Apostles guarded as one of their top two priorities?

Do you see why I've written this chapter? These modern day examples of God's working reflect the biblical and historical pattern that we must pray together if we are to see God's power in sufficient measure. By and large American Christians have abandoned fervent, united, corporate prayer. The Apostles, Jesus, the pattern of Scripture, history, and God's current working today bear witness that until we return to this practice we should only expect to see a worsening declension in societal morals and powerlessness in our churches.

If you are a leader of the people of God, you must make your ministry of mobilizing the people of to prayer together an equal priority of preaching or teaching the Word of God!

WHY IS PRAYING TOGETHER SO IMPORTANT?

I endeavored prove that we must pray together, but it naturally raises the question why has God ordained that we must pray together? The Apostles were where I first noticed this truth in Scripture and it mystified me why they were so adamant. After much consideration I finally understood.

First: The Heart Stays In A Love Relationship

I used to think that the reason the early church had such power with God in Acts was because they practiced missions and evangelism. From experience I had observed that whenever a church aggressively involved herself in missions and evangelism, God blessed that church. No real surprise, for Jesus commanded some form of the Great Commission on at least four different occasions after His resurrection. So naturally I assumed the cause of their power with God in Acts stemmed from their obedience to be on mission with Him.

I no longer believe that. I now believe their practice of missions and evangelism was the effect of their power with God. Here's why I say that – have you ever tried to lead someone to practice missions and evangelism who does not spend any time in the word of God, nor regularly cry out to God with other believers? It's very closely akin to pulling teeth. What do you have to do to motivate that person? Everything you know to do, and even then it rarely works. But let me ask you another question. What do you have to do to involve a believer who is spending regular time devouring, applying and obeying the word of God, who is constantly on his knees with other dynamic believers crying out to God and experiencing God move in response to his prayers? Far from beating him into action, you merely have to point out the opportunity.

Do you see what the Apostles were thinking as leaders? They assumed, "If we can do the two things that have the most immediate, direct, heart impact on those we lead, if we can guide them to apply the Word and encounter the presence of God with other believers, then the majority of it will take care of itself." The effect of the Apostles practicing the two ministries that most immediately, directly, impacted the heart was that the people served God in evangelism and missions. The byproduct of hearing/obeying the word of God and praying with others was being on mission.

I'm not advocating we do nothing to encourage missions and evangelism, but I am saying the emphasis of leading should fall on shepherding the heart of God's people. If the heart's soil is fertilized, the stalk of service quickly sprouts. Isn't it interesting in most American denominations that conversions have flat-lined or declined in the midst of a tremendous population growth and an ever increasing number of evangelism programs? In my own denomination we are baptizing no more than we were 50 years ago. There used to be a 1 to 20 ratio of baptisms to members. Now it's over 1 to 40. We've doubled in size, but are producing an inferior quality of believer. Not coincidentally we began abandoning the sanctity of our midweek prayer service in the 1950's and filling up that time with competing programs. Some churches have abandoned the prayer meeting altogether, others keep some leftover form of it, but in reality it is nothing more

than another service with token attention given to prayer. And the prayers offered are usually nothing more than an organ recital—lungs, livers, kidneys, etc. The heart has been denied the presence of God and the love relationship has withered.

Second: The People Of God Stay On His Agenda

The book of Acts has a series of seven crises that threatened to derail the church from God's agenda but the church successfully handled them. These accounts follow a fourfold pattern.

- The church is growing.
- Trouble arises that threatens the church's continued effectiveness.
- They resolve the problem successfully.
- The church prospers.

For example, Peter and John are threatened to quit proclaiming Jesus, but correctly respond to the intimidation (4:17, 33), Ananias and Sapphira violate the holiness of the church, but Peter quickly deals with it (5:9, 14), the Apostles are arrested and beaten, but they continue proclaiming the word (5:40, 5:42-6:1), the widow conflict poses a potential church split, but they resolve it (6:1-6:7), Persecution arises at the stoning of Stephen, but they persist in preaching. (8:1, 8:4). Herod killed James and slated Peter for execution, but God released him (12:2-11). Certain Jews taught that Gentiles must be circumcised to be saved, but the apostles refute that error and avert a church split (15:1, 22, 32).

Luke explicitly recorded corporate prayer in resolving two of these threats to God's agenda, and it exists in another story. When the Sanhedrin threatened Peter and John, God gave them the boldness they needed through praying together (4:31). Peter's escaped Herod's clutches because the church interceded for him (12:5). In the resolving the widow problem they prayed over the seven they appointed. Although the other stories do not have prayer listed explicitly, we can confidently assume prayer played an integral role. Acts 2:42 and 6:4 reveal it was a lifestyle practice of the leaders, so they naturally would have spent time in prayer although not recorded in the other stories.

Because they depended on God, they never were sidetracked in their mission. Neither external threats nor internal conflict derailed the church. They continued in one accord, and from the strength of that position the church turned the world upside down. The ear of their heart stayed tuned to the voice of God's heart. The howling winds of persecution, the troubled waters of opinion differences, and the land mines of faulty theological belief systems did not overcome that glorious group. Guiding the people of God to stay in the presence of God guarded their usefulness to God.

Third: You Model What You Want Others To Practice

Question: What is important to those you lead and what do they practice?

Answer: What they see you practice.

As a leader God gave you your assignment to spiritually guide others. People by nature are imitators. It's much easier to grasp something by watching and participating than it is to read and discuss. I learned this afresh through co-hosting a conference with First Baptist Church Woodstock in Atlanta, GA. In seven months they went from about 100 in prayer meeting attendance to as many as 1,000, and God was answering prayer powerfully. When this happened we decided to hold a conference on having a dynamic midweek prayer service and promote it throughout multiple states. The one day event consisted of training from 9:00 to 4:15, followed by actually participating in the church's prayer meeting that evening. To my surprise over 600 attended about half of them pastors. Hearts were obviously stirred, so much so the energy was palpable, and the evaluations bore witness to how positively conferees viewed their experience. However, the real evidence came over the

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next 15 months. I've been in many a service with spiritual spasms— excitement for three days then back to normal— nothing more than transitory emotional interruption. However, I received unsolicited feedback from attendees 14 of the next 15 months about what a difference the conference had made in their churches when they implemented the principles they learned. The fruit remained from this conference. In every instance except one, the comments were along these lines: "The teaching times were good, but what really helped me was actually experiencing the prayer meeting that evening." If you want to teach others to pray, you must model prayer. The Apostles knew the best discipleship strategy was to model prayer and create opportunities to pray.

CONCLUSION

Oh, dear reader, do you see why what you are seeking to grow in is so important? By leading other believers to pray you will engage in one of the most important practices of the Christian life. You will encourage those you lead to stay in a love relationship with God; you will create an infinitely greater likelihood that you stay on God's agenda; and you will practice the means through which God has ordained He especially works. If we are to see a spiritual awakening in this land, a reversal of the headlong rush into the moral cesspool in which we currently swim, then there must be fervent intense prayer meetings sprouting up all over this land. If your church would see the power of God in supernatural ways, if the power of God is to descend so that Christians are renewed and the lost come to under conviction of sin, then lead your people to pray. I know of no other foundation equal in importance to praying together, save repentance and the Word. May God bless you as seek to follow him more fully in this matter.